

The Cornell Urban Scholars Program: Cultivating New York City's Next Generation of Civic Leaders

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Abstract

This article describes the origins, evolution, and development of a comprehensive civic engagement program designed to encourage Ivy League students to pursue public service careers with nonprofits and municipal government organizations serving New York City's poorest children, families, and neighborhoods. The article offers a detailed description of the various programs that constitute the Cornell Urban Scholars Program, which includes a high school leadership camp, a public-service-oriented alternative spring break, an undergraduate summer internship program, a graduate research fellowship in children, family, and community development policy making, a non-profit career fair, and a new refereed journal. The article also includes a preliminary analysis of the accomplishments and limitations of this new civic engagement effort. It concludes with a review of the major factors that have led to the program's initial success and ongoing sustainability.

The Unintended Consequences of Globalization

As we begin the new millennium, record numbers of individuals are migrating from the developing nations of the southern hemisphere to Europe, the United States, and Canada in search of expanded employment and economic opportunities. The ties that have historically linked local businesses with neighboring communities have been weakening as global competition forces corporate executives to relocate their production facilities to communities offering the lowest costs. As businesses become less place-bound, workers are under increasing pressure to migrate from areas with declining employment opportunities to regions with expanding economic opportunities. This process of globalization has resulted in unprecedented movements of workers across national boundaries in search of living wage employment.

New York City has witnessed a dramatic population increase during the past ten years as a result of these powerful globalizing forces. The total population of New York City rose from 7 million to 7.7 million between 1990 and 2000. While a modest number

of these new residents relocated from other regions of the United States, the overwhelming majority are immigrants from the Caribbean, Central and South America, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Taking advantage of the liberalization of immigration laws that took place during the Kennedy Administration, these individuals have helped to revitalize many of New York City's older neighborhoods that had suffered significant out-migration and disinvestment between 1960 and 1980.

New York City's Nonprofit Sector

While the strong work ethic, consumer purchasing, housing demand, and cultural practices of immigrant families have contributed to the revitalization of the local communities to which they have relocated, the human service needs of many new immigrants

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present formidable challenges to local social service providers. Organizations such as Legal Services, the New York City Mission Society, the New York City Board of Education, Bellevue Hospital, Catholic Charities, and the Metropolitan Jewish Federation, which assist immigrants in acquiring visas and work permits, securing safe and affordable housing, enrolling their children in local schools, attaining living wage employment, and accessing quality health care are witnessing dramatic increases in their case-

loads. These and other organizations committed to addressing the organizing, advocacy, and direct service needs of these and other low-income families are struggling to carry on their work under increasingly challenging economic conditions.

State and federal funding for programs serving low-income individuals and families have, with the exception of Medicaid and a few other select programs, remained constant while the number of families served by local social service agencies continues to rise. Ongoing devolution of responsibility for key educational, health care, housing, employment, and training programs by states and the federal government has placed new financial pressures on

local nonprofits. Responding to the social service needs of immigrant families whose cultural backgrounds, languages, religious traditions and civic understandings are dramatically different from the majority of their existing staff represents a significant challenge for New York City's human services organizations. Many immigrants who have lived in countries with repressive political regimes have negative attitudes toward government programs, further complicating service delivery efforts, especially among those who may be undocumented. Increasing turnover within the senior ranks of the city's nonprofit sector threatens to undermine the work of these agencies. Having experienced its period of greatest growth as a result of President Johnson's Great Society Programs, Governor Nelson Rockefeller's ambitious urban development efforts, and Mayor John V. Lindsay's community planning and service initiatives in the 1960s, New York City's nonprofit sector has difficulty recruiting new staff, especially given the crushing loan burden with which many students leave college that makes their pursuit of public service careers difficult.

Origins of the Cornell Urban Scholars Program

Concerned about the continued ability of the city's nonprofit service organizations to address the critical needs of the urban poor, Peter Sloane, president of the August Heckscher Foundation for Children, invited Cornell University to create a new public service program to increase the number of students committed to working with organizations serving New York City's most economically distressed neighborhoods. In the spring of 2001, I submitted a proposal on behalf of Cornell University to the Heckscher Foundation to support the establishment of the Cornell Urban Scholars Program (CUSP). This program was designed to encourage Cornell undergraduates to enhance their understanding not just of the causes of urban social inequality, but also of the contribution that NYC's nonprofit organizations were making to address the human consequences of persistent poverty. To achieve these objectives the program offers undergraduates the opportunity to complete an eight-week paid internship with the most innovative and effective nonprofit organizations serving New York City's poorest neighborhoods.

This new public service program was cosponsored by Cornell University's Department of City and Regional Planning, Public Service Center, and Cooperative Extension Service. In 2001, its first year, 129 undergraduates applied to participate, and

the 25 chosen students were given the opportunity to work at one of more than thirty nonprofit organizations and public agencies serving low-income children, families, and neighborhoods. The organizations participating that first year included settlement houses, senior citizen centers, charter schools, after-school programs, urban gardening groups, drug treatment centers, transitional housing facilities, environmental groups, direct action organizing projects, special needs housing sites, labor unions, community design centers, and community media projects.

By June, CUSP students were spending four days each week serving their placement organizations and one day per week participating in a reflective seminar taught by a Cornell University faculty member. Through the seminar, students had the chance to share their placement experiences with their colleagues, receive support in solving placement-related problems, discuss the structural causes of the social problems, and explore alternative policy solutions to these issues.

Feedback received from the first cohort of CUSP students was overwhelmingly positive. However, it was the passion, insight, and commitment to social justice that the students demonstrated at an informal reception at the end of the summer that highlighted CUSP's transformative impact. The Final Reception, which was initially envisioned as a social event and recognition ceremony organized for the students, agency supervisors, participating faculty, and donors, began with a panel presentation involving five students who shared their reflections on their experience. The students who constituted the panel described in eloquent terms the extraordinary obstacles that the people they were working with confronted during their daily struggle to raise their families in the city's poorest neighborhoods. The students discussed how much they had learned and how deeply they had been affected by the courage, determination, generosity, and humor of the low-income children and families with whom they worked. They described how inspired they were by the daily example of the paraprofessionals and professionals whom they were assigned to assist. They also talked about how the experience had made them more aware of their own privilege and obligation to actively support public policies to reduce inequality in our society. Moved by the students' discussion of their experiences and their agency supervisors' positive feedback on the students' performance, Peter Sloane ended the reception by inviting Cornell to develop a proposal for significantly expanding the program in its second year.

When the CUSP students returned to campus in the fall of 2001, they were invited to a dinner to discuss their ideas for improving the program. The students encouraged the participating faculty to develop a spring course to prepare students for their NYC service experience by introducing them to the city's changing demographics, political economy, nonprofit sector, and key public policy challenges. They also recommended the development of a fall course that would enable returning students to systematically reflect on the public policy implications of their NYC experiences by challenging them to write a publishable paper focused on the structural causes of urban poverty. Finally, they made a strong argument in favor of expanding the program to include graduate and professional students whose divergent opinions would challenge their analysis of existing conditions in New York City's poorest communities. During the dinner, the executive director of the Cornell Public Service Center proposed that we launch an alternative spring break in New York City to provide students with limited urban experience, who might be nervous about participating in a summer-long urban internship program, the opportunity to obtain field experience in a highly supportive context. The program development proposals generated by the 2001 Cornell Urban Scholars and the executive director of the Cornell Public Service Center were subsequently presented to the program's Academic Advisory Board, which included former students, participating faculty, and interested administrators. Their support for these proposals led to a successful second-year proposal to the Heckscher Foundation, which enabled CUSP to develop the more comprehensive program recommended by our students and staff.

Expansion of the Cornell Urban Scholars Program

The second-year proposal, which the Heckscher Foundation chose to support in the fall of 2001, included the following new program components.

Urban Immersion/Alternative Spring Break Program: This initiative was designed to provide forty freshmen and sophomores with limited urban community service experience the opportunity to spend seven days in NYC as part of a specially designed alternative spring break. The Urban Immersion Program was crafted to introduce the students to the work of several of NYC's most innovative human service organizations. Participating students would gain hands-on experience supporting the community-building

and social-change efforts of a variety of NYC-based social service organizations. They would also be given the opportunity to tour communities where innovative planning and development are taking place and meet with leaders of the nonprofit organizations leading such efforts. The primary objective of this program is to encourage students who have not been involved in public service activities before to do so as a first step toward their subsequent participation in our Summer Internship Program and a life of public service.

Creating a stronger academic base for the Summer Internship Program:

The second-year proposal also included a prefield preparation course for the undergraduates participating in the Summer Internship Program. CRP 331: Preparation for Urban Fieldwork in New York City was structured to introduce students to the principles of experiential education, field-based research methods, social inequality in NYC, and contemporary urban policy making. One of the key elements of this course was the development of individualized learning plans in which students identified the new knowledge, skills, and personal growth outcomes they were seeking to achieve through their public service experience in New York City. The proposal also included a postinternship research writing

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course to assist participating students in translating their detailed field notes and journal entries into a high-quality scholarly article exploring effective strategies for reducing the level of persistent poverty in New York City. CRP 332: Urban Policy Research Seminar was our effort to respond to the lack of attention given to critical reflection and policy making within many service-learning programs. While tens of thousands of U.S. college students have been involved in credit-based service-learning courses, these students have generated little, if any, new scholarship that critically examines the underlying causes of urban social inequality and explores alternative public policy solutions to foster positive societal change.

Graduate Research Fellowship Program in Children, Family, and Community Development Policy-Making: The proposal also recommended the establishment of a new graduate fellowship program to engage Cornell's best students in participatory action research projects focused on the critical program development and policy-making issues confronting nonprofit organizations and public agencies. With funds provided by the Heckscher Foundation and the Cornell Graduate School, ten students would be awarded \$3,600 summer research stipends and \$1,000 housing allowances to enable them to devote eight weeks to a collaborative research project identified by a NYC-based nonprofit organization serving the urban poor. Successful Graduate Research Fellowship applicants were expected to make independent contact with a nonprofit organization, identify a policy-oriented research question of interest to both the agency and themselves, and formulate a preliminary mixed-method research design to address this question. While the initial proposal did not feature a prefield preparation course, students participating in the program were given the opportunity to participate in a biweekly research seminar conducted by a Cornell faculty member in New York City.

Further Evolution of the Cornell Urban Scholars Program

To further develop and institutionalize this new public scholarship program at Cornell in the fall of 2002, the returning students were invited to a dinner meeting to discuss ways to further improve CUSP's evolving program. The students offered two suggestions for enhancing both the program's learning and service outcomes, which were incorporated into a third proposal that the Heckscher Foundation chose to fund: (1) development of a pre-field seminar for graduate research fellows and (2) support to expand a regional nonprofit and government service career fair.

Development of a prefield preparation seminar for the Graduate Research Fellows: The former participants in the Graduate Research Fellowship Program recommended the development of a prefield preparation course designed to introduce the next cohort of graduate students to the principles, methods, and challenges of contemporary participatory action research. CRP 649: Participatory Action Research in New York City was developed as a two-credit course that presented a critique of positivist-oriented social sciences; an overview of the principles of participatory action research; an introduction to mixed-methods social science;

a presentation of the essential elements of research design; and a summary of the requirements of human subjects review. All of the graduate research fellows participating in CUSP were expected to complete this required prefield preparation class.

Support to expand a regional nonprofit and government service career fair: CUSP students who returned from their New York City experience excited about the possibilities of pursuing a public service career encountered considerable difficulty securing current information regarding available entry-level positions in the nonprofit and public sectors. With encouragement from these students and from the staff at the Cornell Public Service Center and Career Services Center, CUSP included a request for \$10,000 to help expand the recently launched Nonprofit and Government Career and Information Fair. Mainly because of this support, the number of Cornell University, Ithaca College, and Tompkins Cortland Community College students participating in this annual spring event has risen to more than 1,000 students. The event now brings to campus more than eighty nonprofit and government agencies recruiting graduating students interested in full-time public service positions.

Ongoing support from the Heckscher Foundation enabled CUSP to incorporate these new elements into its ongoing program. In the fall of 2003, returning students were again invited to a dinner to discuss the future development of the program. Students attending this event made a single recommendation for CUSP's improvement. They encouraged CUSP to establish a scholarly publication that would serve as a forum for those involved in higher education's ever-expanding service-learning movement to share in analyzing and prescribing ways to address the consequences of our nation's increasingly uneven distribution of wealth, income, and power. Shortly after the dinner meeting, CUSP was asked by a member of Cornell University's Cooperative Extension staff to discuss an evolving issue confronting their Annual 4-H Career Exploration Program that brings six hundred high school leaders to campus each June to explore a wide variety of careers. Given the historical origins of the 4-H program in agriculture, the majority of the activities these high school sophomores and juniors were exposed to during their four-day visit to campus were farming related. However, the growing number of urban youth participating in this program were becoming increasingly frustrated by what they perceived to be irrelevant programs. With the encouragement of several former CUSP students, we agreed to

design and implement, in cooperation with the Family Life Development Center, a four-day youth empowerment program to expose urban youth leaders to the intellectual, career, and public service opportunities available within the fields of architecture, landscape architecture, historic preservation, and city and regional planning.

In the fall of 2003, a fourth proposal was submitted to the Heckscher Foundation to enable CUSP to develop a scholarly publication focused on social justice and to create a public service education program for high school students. With additional funds provided by the foundation, CUSP added the following program elements in the summer of 2004.

New Urban Explorations: A journal of cooperative inquiry and action for social justice and the city: The *New Urban Explorations* journal was designed to be a refereed publication featuring articles jointly produced by local citizen leaders and university-based academics focused on all aspects of social inequality in the city—causes, consequences, and possible solutions. It is viewed as an important new outlet for research emerging from what Ernest Boyer described in 1994 as the “scholarship of engagement.” It is expected to feature cooperatively researched and written articles examining theoretical, methodological, analytical, policy, programmatic, and evaluation issues related to contemporary efforts to reduce the incidence of poverty in the major metropolitan areas of the United States. The title of the journal is taken from a path-breaking book by Benton MacKaye, *New Explorations*, which in 1928 called attention to the many unintended negative consequences of a market-driven economy and argued for public stewardship of the economy to avoid the worst environmental and social impacts of industrialization (1928, xvi). The journal plans to issue its first call for papers in October 2005, with an inaugural issue to appear in the summer of 2006.

Summer Youth Empowerment Program: The Youth Empowerment Program was designed to introduce forty high school sophomores and juniors to the essential elements of cooperative community problem solving, planning, design, and development through an intensive four-day residential program on the Cornell University campus. Students would be introduced to the history of nonviolent social change, basics of direct action organizing, fundamentals of community research, and various group process

techniques. Students would be invited to identify and research a critical issue affecting the quality of life in their communities. The culmination of the program would be an intense “day of action” in which the students would present their research findings to the Quality Communities Subcommittee of the New York State Legislature. During the program, students would also be introduced to various resources and tools for selecting the right college or university and identifying available scholarships.

With the ongoing support of the Heckscher Foundation, CUSP was able to develop a detailed proposal and recruit an outstanding editorial board for its journal while also offering forty urban youth from Rochester, Syracuse, and Binghamton the opportunity to develop their leadership skills. CUSP’s strong performance in 2004 prompted the Heckscher Foundation to invite Cornell to submit a three-year funding proposal to encourage the program’s institutionalization.

Major Outcomes of CUSP

CUSP has provided over 250 Cornell students with the opportunity to enhance their understanding of the origins, nature, and consequences of urban social inequality through paid internships and fellowships with nonprofit organizations and municipal government agencies serving New York City’s poorest children, families, and neighborhoods. The students who have participated in this unique public scholarship program come from a wide range of disciplines, including agriculture and life sciences; architecture, art, and planning; arts and sciences; engineering; hotel administration; human ecology; and industrial and labor relations.

Approximately 40 percent of the students participating in CUSP’s undergraduate programs are from underrepresented minority groups, including African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans. Roughly 30 percent of the undergraduates who have participated in the program have accepted positions with nonprofit organizations following their graduation, including Teach for America, New York City Teachers Corps, AmeriCorps, and VISTA. An additional 20 percent of the undergraduates who have participated in the program have entered graduate or professional programs to continue their preparation for careers in public service.

Each year, eight to ten program participants use their CUSP experiences as the basis for either undergraduate honors or master’s theses. The program has also nurtured strong ties between the leadership of the twenty nonprofit agencies where students are placed

each year and various academic units engaged in research and professional education in fields related to the work of these agencies.

The involvement of the students' academic advisors and department chairs during the program's application and placement phases has led to the creation of an interdisciplinary group of faculty who can exchange their research, teaching, and outreach experiences in what has emerged as an informal learning community. The program has also offered public-service-oriented alumni the opportunity to work with Cornell's current generation of engaged scholars as placement supervisors, mentors, and coaches.

Finally, CUSP has been able to contribute, in significant ways, to the efforts of several poor and working-class communities located along the once-thriving Brooklyn waterfront to make compelling arguments in favor of inclusionary zoning to reduce displacement within a city-supported rezoning process. The housing and zoning research, organizing, and advocacy efforts of several CUSP interns and fellows enabled the North Brooklyn Clergy Cluster and the North Brooklyn Development Corporation to compel the City of New York's Department of Housing and Preservation to require developers of this area to make 25–28 percent of their residential housing units affordable to low- and moderate-income families.

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Keys to Success

CUSP's early success can be attributed to a number of factors. Among them are:

1. The generous support of the Heckscher Foundation, which is deeply committed to enhancing the organizational capacity of the city's nonprofit organizations and nurturing the next generation of inspired nonprofit sector leaders;
2. A highly developed model of experiential education upon which CUSP's initial program design was based, and which built upon the path-breaking work of Cornell University's former Field and International Study Program;

3. CUSP's developmental approach to civic engagement, which introduces high school students to the concept, offers freshmen and sophomores a brief vestibule immersion experience in NYC, provides freshmen and sophomores with the opportunity to complete a highly structured internship program, and gives graduate students the chance to cocreate, in partnership with a community leader, a challenging community-based research project;
4. A broad-based network of Cornell alumni active within NYC's nonprofit network and willing to serve as agency placement supervisors and mentors to both interns and fellows;
5. The expertise of Cornell University's NYC Cooperative Extension Service staff, who were able to assist with program logistics, placement, and orientation;
6. The quality of the staff from the Cornell Public Service Center, who helped CUSP expand the number of students it served by complementing our Heckscher funds with Federal work-study resources, organizing the Alternative Spring Break component of our program, and launching, in cooperation with the Cornell Career Services Program, the Non-Profit and Government Service Career Fair;
7. The willingness of the faculty to critically reflect on each year's program using data provided by CUSP's participating students and staff in order to continually improve the program;
8. The ability of the Department of City and Regional Planning, as CUSP's administrative home, to make significant contributions on a regular basis to address unanticipated expenses.

Current Challenges

As CUSP develops, it will continue to confront a number of program development challenges. For example, it will need to formulate an expansion strategy to accommodate a larger portion of the students who apply to the program each year. In addition, it will have to find a way to place financial support for the program onto the university's tightly controlled development agenda. Finally, it must discover more effective ways to challenge our students to both write about their experiences in the city and become more actively engaged in advocacy efforts to address the

structural causes of social inequality in the city. This is required if we are to develop the kind of civic leaders Cornel West described in the introduction to *Race Matters*.

Only a visionary leadership can motivate “the better angels of our nature” as Lincoln said, and activate possibilities for a freer, more efficient, and stable America—only that leadership deserves cultivation and support. This new leadership must be grounded in grassroots-organizing that highlights democratic accountability. Whoever *our* leaders will be as we approach the twenty-first century, their challenge will be to help Americans determine whether a genuine multiracial democracy can be created and sustained in an era of global economy and a moment of xenophobic frenzy. (7–8)

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